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The Discovery

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The Discovery

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Discovery* (2017), directed by Charlie McDowell.

Keywords

Afterlife, Suicide

Author Notes

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***The Discovery* (2017), dir. Charlie McDowell**

I like "what if" stories and *The Discovery* is just that. What if a scientist proved definitively that there is an afterlife or another plane of existence? That is exactly what Dr. Thomas Harbor has done. He has proven that consciousness is connected to matter or dependent on matter and that some consciousness/matter leaves the body at the time of death and takes up life in another dimension. The result of "the discovery" is that millions of people have completed suicide in order to "get there." Where they "get to," however, remains a mystery, so it is not clear why millions of people have completed suicide to get to some unknown place. What if the place they get to is infinitely worse than the life they had before they completed suicide?

When Socrates was condemned to death, he told his followers not to cry. He always wondered what happened to us after death and now he was going to find out the answer to that question; he did not fear the answer. He then drinks the hemlock. It seems to me a silly idea that

millions of people would be following in the footsteps of such a rare character as Socrates, that they would all be exhibiting the courage that Socrates demonstrated at his death. So, the question remains, why did these millions of people complete suicide in order to "get there," when "there" is unknown?

There are essentially two options. On the one hand, "there" might be a life of eternal bliss. Okay, maybe not total bliss, but at least life "there" could be much more pleasant than life "here." On the other hand, "there" might be a living hell, or a life of maddening boredom, or something in between. Given that "there" might be a painful or unpleasant place, the idea that millions of people are completing suicide to "get there" seems foolish.

But here the movie shifts gears. Now Dr. Harbor is creating a machine that will discover where or what "there" is. Obviously it's a little late for the millions who have completed suicide, but at least we might know something about "there" before more people take the plunge. Dr. Harbor is assisted in his quest to find out what "there" is by his son, Toby, and a group of people living in a sort of castle Harbor has purchased to get away from the criticism that came with the first discovery and its aftermath. Those who live in the castle are people who failed to complete suicide and are in need of comforting and help.

At this point, Dr. Harbor's other son, Will, comes home. He is accompanied by a young woman, Isla, he has met on the ferry to the island where the castle is located. We now find ourselves watching a dysfunctional family and a blossoming, but awkward, relationship between Will and Isla. Both the dysfunctional family and the relationship are integral to the plot of the story, but they also seem to complicate the story unnecessarily.

The gist of the story is that Will discovers that the machine his father has built actually works. At first, it appears that the machine records memories, but it turns out that the machine

actually records one's life "there," in the other plane of existence. At this point there are numerous options. We might discover that the afterlife is a wonderful place to be in any number of ways, or we might discover that the afterlife (what the movie is all about) is a terrible place to be, also in any number of ways. There are so many interesting possibilities here.

But, alas, this is not to be. What we learn about the afterlife is that it is a state of being in which we can redo our previous lives, avoiding in the "there" what we regret about our first life. The "there" is a second chance to get our first lives "right." The basic message of the movie is that we should live differently in this life. We should live in ways that do not bring us regrets. But the path to this message is remarkably convoluted and that seriously diminishes the impact of the message.